



**Threat Assessment and
Management Associates Inc.**
Workplace Violence Specialist

Workplace Bullying

An enlightened look at this disturbing organizational problem.

By Heather Gray

It is so insidious, so subtle at first, that many targets of bullying are not aware of what's really going on for quite some time. Often, a target will discover the terrible reality of this phenomenon when it's already far too late to salvage their reputation. So much damage has usually been exacted on the target's professional character, so much sabotage to their once-stellar career, that they are stunned to realize the extent of their destruction.

The unfortunate target is often foiled in their attempts to recover from the attacks to their self-esteem, their drive and initiative, their contribution, dedication and loyalty to their career and their organization, and to seek justice. To the target's ultimate despair is the slow realization that no one in the organization is motivated or equipped to seek justice on his or her behalf. Often those in power will not advocate for them, although scores of co-workers around the target know exactly what has transpired, having witnessed the tedious and methodical annihilation of a once-productive employee.

Gary and Ruth Namie, clinical psychologists who have devoted their practice to the study, education and eradication of workplace bullying, founded the non-profit organization, the Campaign Against Workplace Bullying (CAWB). They have discovered that 75% of targets eventually left an organization because of bullying. Since over 80% of bullies were in management positions, they had some measure of power over their target, which they exploited to their own sadistic ends.

The Namie's define workplace bullying as "the repeated, malicious verbal mistreatment of a target (the recipient) by a harassing bully (the perpetrator) that is driven by the bully's desire to control the target." They call this phenomenon: work trauma.

The Bully

The overriding objective of any workplace bully is power, control, domination and subjugation. The means by which that objective is attained varies from bully to bully but can include deception, corruption and collusion, negligence, maladministration, dereliction of duty, conspiracy, and even criminal acts.

The Canada Safety Council charges that bullies tend to be insecure people with poor or non-existent social skills and little empathy. They turn this insecurity outward, finding satisfaction in their ability to attack and diminish the capable people around them. A workplace bully subjects the target to unjustified criticism and trivial fault finding. In addition, the bully humiliates the target, especially in front of others, and ignores, overrules, isolates and excludes the target.

According to Tim Field, a workplace bullying specialist based in the United Kingdom, "Most cases of bullying involve a serial bully: one person to whom all the dysfunction can be traced. The serial bully has done this before, is doing it now and will do it again. The serial bully in the workplace is often found in a job which is a position of power, has a high administrative or procedural content but little or no creative requirement."

The bully is adept at slithering away from accountability; often skating out of situations to which most would be called to account. This is largely because of their amazing ability to use deception and misperception to turn the tables on their accuser. Field notes that, when called to account, the bully instinctively denies everything and then mounts an aggressive counter-attack based on distortion or outright fabrication. The purpose is to avoid answering the question, thus avoiding the requirement of accepting responsibility for their behaviour. This tactic forces the target into giving another long explanation to counter the bully's allegations. Quite predictably, the bully's original transgression is forgotten.

Bullies also rely on the denial of others and the fact that when their target finally reports the abuse they will not be believed. The target is likely to hear: "Are you sure this is really going on?" The very fact that it sounds so bizarre, so absurd, is the very reason many will be highly skeptical. Not experiencing life in the madhouse firsthand makes it difficult to fathom.



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The bully will have carefully crafted a sphere of influence, slowly schmoozing and brainwashing key individuals up the line in the organization. Those individuals, some willing participants and some unwitting pawns support the bully, blindly believing all of the lies and manipulations that have preceded the revelation of abuse by the target.

Bullies often effectively sabotage the target, attacking their credibility and reputation, slowly and cunningly, by slipping disparaging comments into seemingly innocent conversations with their benefactors. By the time the target comes forward, the damage to his or her reputation has poisoned the environment, making justice nearly impossible.

The Target

A bullied person is stereotypically weak or a little bit different. But this is not usually the case in the workplace. The Canada Safety Council states that “the target chosen by an adult bully will very often be a capable, dedicated member, well-liked by co-workers. Bullies are most likely to pick on people with an ability to cooperate and a non-confrontative interpersonal style. The bully considers their capability a threat, and determines to cut them down.”

Targets are disempowered such that they become dependent on the bully to allow them to get through each day without their life being made hell. This disparity of power and tragic dependence can be likened to that of an abused child, spouse or a hostage, who finds themselves in the impossible situation of trying to appease the cruel master in order to be spared their life, or, in the case of workplace bullying, their dignity and self-worth.

The Workplace

But what of the organization that allows such brutality, that protects a bully, at great cost to the bottom line, the morale of the target and co-workers, and at great risk to the corporate reputation? How does a company justify the implicit protection of a one-person wrecking crew, a tyrant who can wreak enormous damage during the course of a career? It is surprising that, according to the Canada Safety Council, the prevalence of workplace bullying is four times more common than other workplace transgressions such as sexual harassment and racial discrimination.

The Namies write that, “A bully-tolerant workplace can be quite pathological, gripped in fear, with everyone, including management, too petrified to hold the bully accountable for his or her unforgivable behaviour.” The Namies feel that when employers ignore what is going on in the trenches, they will have a hard time believing the cruelty that is happening. This will further empower the bully to continue.

When looking back on the situation, an employer might attribute the new unproductivity from a formerly high-achieving employee as coming from a recent change, maybe having a new supervisor. But, note the Namies, “The bully and accomplices provide the camouflage that blocks the accurate, truthful view for senior management. Decline in performance from being traumatized is instead portrayed to higher ups as a defect in the targeted person. Despite years of recorded excellence, for some inexplicable reason, the target’s drop off is accepted as reality when described by the very person responsible for the conversion of a normal, healthy workplace into a daily chamber of horrors.”

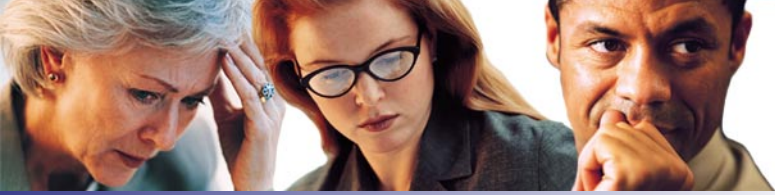
The Business Costs

Ignoring workplace bullying can have tangible and intangible costs for employers. If a bully is causing high staff turnover, there will be the associated costs such as lost efficiency, recruitment, hiring bonuses, and time for the replacement to get up to speed. Talent flight from the organization is a real possibility. As well, a tyrant may need to be bought out in order to leave.

Beware of accidents increasing as employees become fatigued (from loss of sleep from bullying-induced stress and anxiety). This is also a possibility when there is high staff turnover and new employees are on a learning curve. There may need to be stress-related payments for Workers’ Compensation claims and/or disability benefits.

Consider also the potential litigation costs for attorney fees, settlements, jury awards and appeals. There may also be punitive and/or damage awards through a human rights tribunal.

Some intangible costs of not stopping bullying include damage to a corporation’s reputation. This can appear as bad public relations stemming from high-profile litigation or publicity that directly names the organization as an active supporter of offensive, harassing bullies.



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Another consideration is that fearful employees can commit sabotage when management fails to purge or punish the tyrant. Staff can also resist initiatives launched by the company if they feel that management can't be trusted to look after employees' interests.

Organizational Solutions

There are tangible things governments and organizations can do to mitigate and even eliminate the severely destructive effects of bullying. Governments can enact nation-wide workplace violence legislation that includes bullying. In lieu of legislation, governments can develop standards for voluntary compliance. In the workplace, organizations can:

- Implement a code of conduct, demanding respect of others and promoting a zero-tolerance of bullying tactics.
- Show true leadership by senior management, such as leading by example and taking action.
- Change organizational culture by removing the barriers to reporting incidents that need to be investigated and adjudicated.
- Have senior administrators intervene at the earliest possible opportunity.
- Outsource investigations and assessments.
- Closely supervise and hold accountable all levels of managers.
- Communicate with front-line staff.
- Be sensitive to the likelihood that bullying is a reality.
- Work with the target to restore their self-confidence and productivity.
- Dismiss the bully, when warranted.

Spot a Bully

Tim Field has developed an extensive portfolio of the typical serial bully. Most notably, the serial bully:

- Is a convincing, practiced liar.
- Is self-opinionated and displays arrogance, audacity, a superior sense of entitlement and is adept at escaping accountability.
- Undermines and destroys anyone whom the bully perceives to be an adversary, a potential threat, or who can see through the bully's mask.
- Is adept at creating conflict between those who would otherwise collate incriminating information about him or her.
- Uses criticism and humiliation in the guise of addressing shortfalls in performance. In reality, these means are for control and subjugation, not for performance enhancement.
- Distorts, twists, concocts and fabricates criticisms and allegations, and abuses the disciplinary procedures. Again, for control and subjugation, not for performance enhancement.
- Is autocratic and dictatorial.
- Appears to be intelligent, but that intelligence is focused exclusively on deviousness, cunning, scheming and manipulation.
- Is a divisive and disruptive influence; their departments are dysfunctional and inefficient, their behaviour serving to prevent staff from performing their duties.
- Usurps others' objectives, falsely winning allegiance in their corruption for personal power, which exhibits itself through the establishment of a clique or gang. This corruption of power perpetuates itself and the legacy continues.